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AN UNKNOWN HEBREW VERSION OF THE HISTORY OF JUDITH.

By M. Gaster.

Reprinted from the "Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archæology," March, 1894.

In the Hebrew literature we find two forms of the Judith legend—one long and elaborate, the other short, concise. The former is almost akin to the Greek version, though not absolutely identical, and has been published hitherto two or three times. The short recension, however, has been known till now only in one single text: in the collection of tales attributed to R. Nissim of Kairuan (N. Africa, eleventh century).

It is not my intention to enter here into a detailed disquisition of this subject. Schürer has summed up the results of modern and ancient investigations, and to his book and bibliography I refer.*

The consensus of opinion is, that the Judith legend originated in the time of the Makkabæans, and that it was originally composed in a Semitic idiom, Hebrew or Aramaic. No one has, however, been able to establish this conclusion with any certainty, or to explain who the mysterious Holophernes was, or to fix the exact place (Bethulia) where the tragedy took place.

Many a minor incident in the Greek text is far from being clear, such as xii, 7: "thus she abode in the camp three days, and went out in the night into the valley of Bethulia, and washed herself in a fountain of water by the camp." There is no reason assigned for this peculiar ablution, nor does it stand in any connection with the other religious ordinances, which we are told that she observed so punctiliously.

These very ordinances, such as her refusal to eat of Holophernes' food, have been used by modern critics for the purpose of determining the date of the composition of this book.

* *E. Schürer*, "Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi, II (1886), p. 599–603.

However difficult it may be to determine the relation between the two recensions, little doubt, I think, is left as to the true character of the larger recension.

This writing belongs clearly to that class of literary productions which Schürer classifies under the title of *parænetic* tales, *i.e.*, writings composed for the purpose of edifying and encouraging the reader; they were written with a tendency.

It is therefore not very probable that this was the original form of the tale or history of Judith, unless we assume the whole to be a pure fiction, evolved out of the brains of the writer, without any foundation whatsoever on fact.

But whoever is acquainted with the old apocryphal and pseudo-epigraphical literature must reject a purely fictitious origin of "Judith." *A Judith* must have existed, and must have been—at least in the conscience and memory of the people—the author of some daring act, perpetrated by her in times of dire and cruel persecution.

This figure was then taken up by the writer of the romance, if I may call by this name the longer recension, and the simple ancient tale was carefully worked up; prayers, sermons, addresses were freely added, until the whole assumed the form in which we find it in that recension.

That the original tale must have suffered under this poetical treatment need not be specially pointed out. Hence the difficulty of determining the historical element in that romantic tale.

Those very elements which characterise the longer recension are missing however, in the shorter text. In this we find nothing of a Holofernes, nor is Bethulia mentioned, nor anything about the food; and as to the bathing in the fountain, it is only here we have a perfectly clear explanation, in conformity with the Law.

The only text of this recension which had been known hitherto, was printed for the first time in Constantinople, 1519, then Venice, 1544, and reprinted by Jellinek. It is incomplete. But even in this mutilated text neither Holophernes nor Bethulia are mentioned; not one of the prayers and supplications; also nothing of Achior.

I have now had the rare fortune of discovering another copy of this same recension, which is both much older and much more complete, and as will be seen anon of utmost importance.

Through the kindness of a friend I have come into the possession of a considerable number of very valuable ancient Hebrew manu-

scripts, all hailing from Persia, or rather, from Babylon. Among these MSS., of which I will give a more detailed description on another occasion, there is one of the highest interest (now No. 82 of my collection of Hebrew MSS.). It is a collection of close upon 300 Talmudic tales. A volume of 198 leaves octavo, paper, written in a very ancient character. It is the most complete and probably the oldest collection of this kind, as I consider the MS. to belong to the Xth or commencement of the XIth century. The language, especially of those portions that are written in Aramaic, is much purer, more archaic, and more akin to the Mandaic than that of the corresponding tales to be found in our editions of the Talmud. From this, or a similar collection, R. Nissim has drawn the tales which he incorporated into his book. We find in this MS. also some of those tales which are only alluded to in the Talmud, and which are found in a complete form in the Aruch, or Rashi, or in Nissim's collection, such as the history of the "weasel and the pit." The MS. must have been written somewhere in Babylon. The pages are covered with old Persian glosses, which a later possessor of the XIIIth or XIVth century has added in order to explain the text.

In this collection we find then also the tale of Judith's heroic deed. In comparing this text with the one hitherto known, which forms part of the collection of R. Nissim, one can see at a glance that the latter has borrowed it from our MS. collection, omitting exactly those incidents which are of the highest importance for our investigation. He omitted the *heading* and the name of the king slain by Judith. These two, fortunately preserved in my MS., throw an unexpected light upon the history and origin of the Judith legend, and what is more, furnish us with an historical date, which may assist us to fix definitely the period when it happened.

The heading runs so: "The eighteenth day of Adar, the day in which Seleukos came up." This heading is of the utmost importance. It is worded absolutely in the same way as all the dates *in the Megillath Taanith.* It is an established fact that this Megillah constituted the calendar of the festival days of the Makkabæan period. The days in which a victory was reported, was fixed as a day of rejoicing. The 18th of Adar is missing in the Megillath Taanith, which has come down to us in a fragmentary state. This date is now supplied by our text, which, as that wording unmistakably demonstrates, must have belonged originally to the old

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Megillath Taanith. Considering that these festival days were abrogated before the middle of the third century, there is no wonder that portions of it have disappeared. It is a fortunate coincidence that we have recovered at the same time the day on which the Jewish feast was kept and a portion of the Megillath Taanith. This settles the Makkabæan origin of *Judith.* Instead of the unknown Holofernes we get then a historical name *Seleukos*, which makes the fact related in the tale at any rate less improbable. Judith is also not a widow, but a maiden; and it is questionable whether *Betulah*, בתולה (virgin), has not suggested to the romancer the otherwise unknown *Bethulia*, against which the also unknown Holophernes wages an unsuccessful war, which costs him his life.

In our text the town which Seleukos besieges is Jerusalem, and the reason which Judith gives for her coming is much more plausible, than the very curious and unsatisfactory in the long recension.

In our text, which is as simple a narrative as can be conceived, we find also a satisfactory explanation of the bath: it is the ablution of purification prescribed by Leviticus xv, 19–28, and xv, 13.

I may mention further that the Synagogue has always brought the history of Judith in connection with the Makkabæan period. One of the variations of our recensions, published by Jellinek,* is actually embodied in a liturgical piece which was recited on the feast of Dedication, established by Judah Makkabee. Judith is mentioned in connection with this festival also by Abudarham (fourteenth century) in ed. Venice, f. 135 *a*. The longer recension is also found in connection with the history of the Makkabæans, in Hemdath-hayamin,† reprinted by Jellinek.‡ Of this longer recension there is—as I may mention by the way—another copy in the MS. Chronicle of Jerahmeel, from which I have published the Testament of Naphtali; and to the kindness of Dr. Neubauer I owe the information that Cod. 2240, 5 (Oxford) contains also the long recension.

The profound difference between the short and the long recension, precludes the possibility that the former may be an abbreviation from the latter; the changes are much too radical. In fact, every essential incident is so much altered in the latter that it can by no means be the result of mere abbreviation. If it were an

* Bet-hamidrasch, I, p. 132–136.

† Constantinople, ואתחנן, II, f. 62*b*–65*c*.

‡ Bet-hamidrasch, II, p. 12–22.

abridged text, names and situations would have been retained, and only the rhetorical portions omitted, which however is not the case. Almost everything is different in the two recensions.

We must therefore perforce admit that we have two distinct recensions, of which one may be, and probably is, the unvarnished simple popular tale, the recital of a memorable incident which had happened in the time of the Makkabæan struggles, in which a maiden Judith played an important *rôle*, and the other a romantical panegyric based upon that fact, and told in the form of a paraenetic tale, intended to convey comfort and edification to the reader.

In questions of this kind one cannot be cautious enough, and I have limited myself to state the facts, and to draw only such conclusions from them as are warranted by the words of the text, which follows here in the original and in translation.

The History of Judith.

"A tale. Our teachers taught: on the eighteenth day of Adar [*i.e.*, one is not allowed to fast]; it is the day on which Seleukos went up. As we are told, at the time when he besieged Jerusalem, the Israelites were fasting and had put sacks on. There was a very beautiful woman named Judith, daughter of Aḥitob. On every day she used to pray to God in ashes and sackcloth. God inspired her with the thought that a miracle would happen through her. So she went to the porters of the gate and said to them: 'Open the gates for me, may be that a miracle will happen through me.' They said to her, 'Hast thou, perchance, turned to the other side?' She answered, 'God forbid.' So they opened the gates to her, and she went to the camp of Seleukos, she and her handmaid with her. She said to them (*i.e.*, the soldiers of Seleukos), 'I have a secret errand unto the king. They went and told the king, and said to him, 'A beautiful maiden has come from Jerusalem, and she says that she has a secret errand unto the king.' He said, 'Let her come in.' She went before the king, and fell down upon her face before him.' He said to her, 'What is that thou wishest?' She answered and said, 'My lord king, I belong to a great family in Jerusalem, my brothers and my father's house were kings and high priests. I have now heard them speak concerning thee, that the time has arrived when this town is to fall in thine hands, therefore I have come first to find favour in thine eyes.'

"When the king beheld her beautiful countenance and heard her words, she found favour in his eyes; and he rejoiced at the tidings she had told him. Then he commanded his servants to prepare a great feast. Whilst they were preparing it, he ordered all the princes to leave, as he wished to have the company of the damsel. He asked her to sin. She answered and said, 'My lord king, for this very thing I have come hither with all my heart, but now it is impossible, as I am in my impurity; to-night is the time of my purification; I therefore desire the king to herald throughout the camp, that no one should stay the woman and her handmaid, when she goes out in the night to the fountain of water. When I return I will give myself over to the king, that he do what is pleasing in his sight.'

"The wicked man did accordingly. In the night he invited all the princes, his generals and his servants, and they ate and rejoiced at that great feast and got drunk. When they saw that the king was nodding his head, they said, 'let us depart, for he wishes to have the company of the Hebrew maiden.' So all went forth and left the king alone with the maiden and with her handmaid. She then took the falchion and cut off his head. She took the head and went out. When they left the soldiers noticed them, and they said to one another, 'no one is to touch them, such is the command of the king.' So they passed (the camp) and reached Jerusalem in the middle of the night. They called upon the porters and said, 'open the gates for us, for the miracle has already come to pass.' The porters replied, 'is it not sufficient for thee to have defiled thyself, that thou wisheth to deliver the blood of Israel (to their enemies)?' So she did swear to them; but they would not believe her until she showed them the head of that wicked king; only then they believed her and opened the gates unto her. That day they kept as a day of feasting; on the morrow the Israelites went forth against that army and slew them until they had destroyed them completely. The residue left their horses and their money and ran away. And the Israelites came and spoiled everything.

Cod. Heb. Gaster, No. 82 (f. 172*a*–173*a*).

מעשה. תנו רבנן: בשמונה עשר באדר יום שעלה סליקוס
הוא. דתניא. כשצר על ירושלים היו ישראל בשקים ובתענית.
והיתה שם אשה אחת יפה ביותר. ויהודית בת אחיטוב
שמה. והיתה מתפללת בכל יום לפני הקב״ה בשק ואפר.
נתן הקב״ה בלבה לעשות נס על ידה. והלכה אצל שוערי
הפתח. ואמרה להן פתחו לי אפשר שיעשה נס על ידי.
172b אמרו לה שמא פירשת לצד אחר. אמרה להם חוס ושלום.
פתחו לה. הלכה אצל מחנה סליקוס היא ושפחתה.
אמרה להן דבר סתר יש לי למלך. הלכו והגידו למלך.
ואמרו נערה יפה באת מירושלם. ואמרה דבר סתר לי
למלך. אמר להן תכנס. נכנסה אצל המלך ונשתטחה
לפניו. אמר לה המלך מה טיבך. אמרה לו אדוני המלך
אני ממשפחה גדולה שבירושלם. ואחי ובית אבי מלכים
וכהנים גדולים. ושמעתי עליך שהיו אומרין כבר הגיע
עת העיר הזאת ליפול בידיך. ולפיכך קדמתי למצוא חן
לפניך. כיון שראה המלך את יפיה ושמע את דבריה
נשאה חן בעיניו. ושמח על הבשורה שבישרתו. וצוה
לעבדיו לעשות לו סעודה גדולה. כשהן מתעסקין בכך
צוה להוציא כל בני המלכות מעליו. ונתיחד עם אותה
הנערה. ותבעה לדבר תקלה. השיבה ואמרה אדוני
המלך כל עצמי לא באתי לכאן אלא לדבר זה. אבל
בשעה זו אי אפשר. שאני בנדותי. ולילה זו טבילתי.
אבל אני רוצה שיצוד המלך על הכרוז. כל מי שיראה

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כטוב בעיניו . עשה כן אותו רשע . ולילה זימן כל בני 173a
המלכות . ושריו ועבדיו . ואכלו אותה סעודה בשמחה
גדולה . ונשתכרו ביין . כיון שראו בני המלכות שהרכין
המלך בראשו . אמרו נצא מלפניו . שרצונו להתיחד עם
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ישראל . עד שנשבעה להן . ולא האמינו עד שהראת להן
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העולם . והשאר הניחו סוסיהן וממונן וברחו . ובאו ישראל
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